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Ya Ping (Amy) Hsiao and Peter Broeder

# Applying the writing scales of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* to the new HSK test of proficiency in Chinese: Realities, problems and some suggestions for Chinese language teachers and learners

**Abstract:** This article explores levels of proficiency in Chinese with reference to the new HSK (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi) Chinese Proficiency Test and the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR). Special attention is given to learning and teaching the writing of Chinese characters and the use of Pinyin, a phonetic Romanization of the Chinese language. First, the feasibility of both language scales is considered as a means of capturing proficiency in Chinese; then descriptions of Chinese courses offered by university language centres are analysed; and finally, semi-structured interviews with teachers of such courses and their learners are reported. This results in a number of suggestions for specifying instructional designs for teaching Chinese writing skills.

**Keywords:** HSK (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi), *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR), level descriptors, writing skills, teaching Chinese as a foreign language

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# 1 Introduction

The Council of Europe developed the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR; Council of Europe 2001) as a means of describing proficiency in foreign languages. The CEFR is now gaining ground in North America, in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond as its usefulness becomes increasingly apparent (Little 2007; Duff 2008; Broeder and Fu 2009). The HSK (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi) test of proficiency in Chinese (Hanban/Confucius Institute Headquarters 2008), which was introduced at the end of 2009, applies the CEFR to the description of levels of proficiency in Chinese.

Li and Zhang (2004) have argued that the CEFR should not be applied to Chinese for three reasons. First, the political agenda of the CEFR is to achieve greater unity among Council of Europe member states, which does not include China; second, the CEFR is primarily for European languages that use alphabetic writing systems, whereas Chinese is a non-alphabetic language; and third, the socio-cultural differences between Chinese and European languages lie beyond the scope of CEFR. This article is particularly concerned with the second of these reasons and explores the implications of the new HSK and the CEFR for the learning and teaching of Chinese, with particular reference to writing skills. Teachers have reported problems when using the HSK/CEFR to design their curriculum and students have reported problems when using self-assessment scales.

## 2 The CEFR and proficiency levels in the new HSK

### 2.1 The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

The Council of Europe developed the CEFR in order to stimulate the learning of languages and enhance mutual understanding (see Broeder and Martyniuk 2008). The CEFR defines language proficiency at six levels arranged in three bands:

- *Basic user* (levels A1 and A2): includes the most elementary expressions and everyday routines; however, successful communication depends to a considerable extent on help from the learner's interlocutor.
- *Independent user* (levels B1 and B2): the levels at which the learner can handle everyday language use, is mostly able to interact without too much effort, and can generally maintain a normal speech tempo – though consideration must be given to the fact that he or she is not a native speaker of the language in question.

- *Proficient user* (levels C1 and C2): the levels at which the learner has hardly any problems with communication and interlocutors do not need to take account of his or her non-native speaker status.

The six proficiency levels are specified for five skills: listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production and writing. For each skill, the levels of language proficiency are elaborated using “can do” descriptors; the overall scheme is summarized in the so-called self-assessment grid (Council of Europe 2001: 26–27).

Since 2001 the CEFR has been translated into 38 languages (see [www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Cadre1\\_en.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Cadre1_en.asp)). As the CEFR is becoming more and more influential in language policy and language education, a number of issues arise that need to be addressed (see, for example, the special issue of the *Modern Language Journal* 91(4), 2007). The CEFR levels do *not* refer to the specific linguistic features of individual languages. The growing acceptance of the standards presented in the CEFR has created a situation in which public bodies, examination institutes, language schools and university departments concerned with the teaching and testing of languages are increasingly interested in relating their curricula and examinations to the common reference levels. A manual for relating language examinations to the CEFR (Council of Europe 2009; see also Martyniuk 2010) was developed in order to assist Council of Europe member states and national and international providers of examinations in linking their certificates and diplomas to the CEFR in a reliable manner.

## 2.2 The new HSK Chinese Proficiency Test

In 2009, the HSK Chinese Proficiency Test was revised in order to be better able to assess the Chinese language proficiency of non-native speakers learning Chinese as a foreign language (Hanban/Confucius Institute Headquarters 2008, 2010). To facilitate its general acceptance, Hanban decided to incorporate the CEFR levels into the new HSK, which distinguishes the following six levels of Chinese language proficiency:

- HSK-Level 1: Designed for learners who can understand and use some simple Chinese characters and sentences to communicate; prepares them for further learning of Chinese.
- HSK-Level 2: Designed for elementary learners who can use Chinese in a simple and direct manner, applying it in a basic fashion in their daily lives.
- HSK-Level 3: Designed for elementary-intermediate learners who can use Chinese to meet the demands of their personal lives, studies and work, and are capable of completing most of the communicative tasks they experience during a visit to China.

- HSK-Level 4: Designed for intermediate learners who can discuss a relatively wide range of topics in Chinese and are capable of communicating with Chinese speakers at a high standard.
- HSK-Level 5: Designed for learners who can read Chinese newspapers and magazines, watch Chinese films and are capable of writing and delivering a lengthy speech in Chinese.
- HSK-Level 6: Designed for learners who can easily understand any information communicated in Chinese and are capable of smoothly expressing themselves in written or oral form.

The new HSK emphasizes comprehensive language and communication ability (Xie 2011). The HSK test includes written tests designed to measure listening, reading and writing skills as well as tests of speaking (Hanban/Confucius Institute Headquarters 2008). Compared to the old structure, the new HSK has reduced the score ranks from eleven to six (Levels 1 to 6), and test ranks from four (Basic, Elementary, Intermediate and Advanced) to three (Elementary, Intermediate and Advanced). Regarding the difficulty level, the new HSK has reduced the number of words and characters to a level manageable for foreign students within the number of hours of study usual at most language centres around the world. These dramatic changes were introduced to accommodate an increasing number of prospective test takers.

In Table 1, we present an overview of the old and the new structures of the HSK test. In many ways the old structure was more suitable for learners of Chinese as a second language and for speakers of other Chinese dialects than the revised test. Although the pronunciation of Mandarin Chinese can be very different from that of other dialects, shared linguistic features – similarities in syntax and vocabulary – make it much easier for speakers of other Chinese dialects (e.g., Cantonese) than for speakers of other languages (e.g., English or Dutch). The old HSK required learners to learn 1,000 words to achieve the Basic level, which could be very challenging for beginners.

### 3 Applying the CEFR to Chinese

#### 3.1 The Chinese writing system

Since the CEFR was developed in Europe, the target users are speakers of European/Western languages that use alphabetic writing systems (Beeker, Canton and Fasoglio 2009). In an alphabetic language such as English, users can

Old HSK (<2009)			New HSK (>2010)			CEFR (>2001)
Levels		Words	Levels (writing)	Words	Levels (speaking)	Levels
Advanced	11	>8,840	6	>5,000	Advanced	C2
	10					
Intermediate	9	5,257	5	2,500		C1
	8					
	7					
Elementary	6	3,052	4	1,200	Intermediate	B2
	5		3	600		B1
	4					
Basic	3	1,033	2	300	Beginners	A2
	2					
	1		1	150		A1

Table 1: Old and new structures of the HSK test

graphic form	大	天	夫
pronunciation	dà	tiān	fū
meaning	big	sky, day	husband

Table 2: Examples of three Chinese characters with similar graphic forms

more or less spell out the sounds they speak based on the alphabet and a number of rules they have learned (Gao 2000). On the other hand, Chinese is a non-alphabetic language that uses Chinese characters (*zì*, *Hànzì*, *Zhōngguó zì*) as its writing system. Words are mostly composed of one or two characters, and unlike the letters in an alphabetic language, each Chinese character has its own meaning. For everyday reading and writing, about 3,000 characters are needed.

Chinese characters are composed of strokes, and each character has its own graphic form, pronunciation and meaning. The relationship between graphic form and pronunciation is so complex that it is not possible to know the pronunciation from seeing the graphic form of a character. For example, the three characters in Table 2 look very similar to each other, but their pronunciation is totally different.

### 3.2 The sixth skill: learning and teaching the writing system

In this section, we will argue that teaching and learning Chinese includes a sixth skill that does not exist in most European languages: learning the writing system itself. Learning Chinese characters involves three separate elements: graphic form, pronunciation and meaning. The learning of graphic forms includes learning about types of stroke (*bīhuà*), stroke orders (*bǐshùn*), radicals (*bùshǒu*), and the structure of characters. There are eight basic stroke types and 25 variations of them (Fei 2006). In most characters, the individual strokes can be grouped into identifiable and recurring components. For example, according to one estimate, about 80% of characters consist of two components, the *radical*, which signifies the meaning, and the phonetic component, which signifies the pronunciation (Gao 2000). Dictionaries are often organized by radical. However, there are 214 radicals, and the relation between the phonetic component and the actual pronunciation of the character is very complex (Fei 2006). For example, consider the characters in Table 3. All of them have the same phonetic component, the character 台, which is pronounced as *tái*. In the first four characters, the pronunciation matches the phonetic component, whereas there is no such match in the final three.

The visual complexity of a character depends on the number and type of strokes and the way in which the different components are structured. It is cognitively demanding for novice learners of Chinese to memorize different strokes and their combinations to form new characters (Lee and Kalyuga 2011). It is thus much more difficult to learn to read and write characters than to learn the 26 or so letters from which words are formed in alphabetic languages. Table 4 presents the findings of a survey of 34 adult Dutch students at the end of a Chinese beginners' course (level A1) at the language centre of a Dutch university (Zhou 2010). The

Character	Pinyin	Meaning	Radical and associate meaning
台	tái	platform; unit; term of address	口 mouth
抬	tái	carry; raise; uplift	扌 hand
枱	tái	table; desk	木 wood
邰	tái	surname; state in modern Shanxi	阝 city
胎	tāi	unborn child; embryo; fetus	月 meat; flesh
治	zhì	control; cure; govern; manage	氵 water
怡	yí	happy; joyful	忄 heart

**Table 3:** Different characters with the same phonetic component

	Mean	Standard Deviation
It is difficult learning to write Chinese characters	3.82	.99
Learning radicals helps to write Chinese characters	4.59	.42
Learning the stroke order helps to write Chinese characters	4.09	.86
It is better to postpone writing Chinese characters until after some basic Chinese has been learned	3.62	1.28
Pinyin transcription helps to learn the correct pronunciation	4.59	.56

**Table 4:** Difficulty of learning Chinese characters according to university students after completing Chinese beginners course A1-Level (n = 34; 5-point scale, 1 = disagree, 5 = agree)

participants confirm what is well-known, that learning Chinese characters is difficult.

Thus far, we have examined the sixth skill – learning and teaching the writing system – from the perspective of characters. However, there is a second aspect to this skill: learning the Romanization of Chinese characters known as Pinyin.

Since learners of Chinese cannot get information about pronunciation directly from most characters, it was found necessary to provide visual pronunciation prompts for learning Chinese characters. For this reason, in the 1950s the Chinese government developed Pinyin (spelled sounds) as the official system for transcribing the sounds of Chinese characters using the Latin alphabet (Swofford 2004). In the Pinyin system, a character is transcribed as a syllable composed of a consonant (initial), a vowel (final) and a tone with a diacritic sign placed above the vowel. As shown in Table 3, the Pinyin transcription of the character 台 is *tái*. Pinyin is commonly used with native, second and foreign language learners of Chinese at beginner’s level. In many learning materials, Pinyin transcription is printed above the Chinese characters. Though it might seem more convenient to use Pinyin transcription as the only writing system, most Chinese native speakers use characters rather than Pinyin for written communication. Thus to be able to read and write, Chinese learners still have to learn characters (Gao 2000).

Based on our recent classroom survey, students agree that it is useful and necessary to learn Pinyin, but they also feel that learning and using Pinyin is no easy task. Our results showed that students often encounter the following three problems:

- Confusion due to the fact that most European languages use the same alphabet to represent totally different sounds (e.g., j, q, x, z, c, r – for ‘j’, for instance, compare Dutch ‘jas’, English ‘job’, Spanish ‘Juan’);
- Complicated rules of spelling, e.g., the indication of diphthongs (e.g., ü/u, iou/iu, uei/ui);



- Problems segmenting constituents (e.g., verb + object, particle *le*, complement).

In other words, unlike the Chinese, speakers of European languages can go straight to the writing system itself (the alphabet) without first having to learn another ‘explanatory code’ (Pinyin based on the alphabet) before they can gain access to the official writing system itself (Chinese characters). Zhou (2010) noted the following typical remarks made by two native Chinese teachers of Chinese language courses to Dutch university students:

“In this first course the most important thing is to get to know the Chinese language a little bit. This is already hard enough. When people really are into learning Chinese, they can continue with another course, but you should not introduce the characters in the first course.”

“I believe the majority of the course should be taught using Pinyin, having had experience (a long time ago) with a teaching style just using characters. However, I believe an introduction to characters is fundamental in learning the language.”

These statements not only reflect the difficulties involved in learning Pinyin but also the need to use Pinyin for written communication and to learn pronunciation. The role of Pinyin in learning and teaching to write Chinese characters is obviously not dealt with in the CEFR, and the CEFR’s writing scales are not specified in terms of the writing system to be used. When applied to Chinese, the example of writing a postcard at level A1 (see Table 5) is ambiguous: should learners be able to write a postcard to a Chinese friend in Pinyin or in characters? Since the CEFR provides “can do” descriptors as a tool for student self-assessment, the de-

	General descriptors	Specific descriptors
A2	I can write short, simple notes and messages relating to matters in areas of immediate need. I can write a very simple personal letter, for example thanking someone for something.	I can write a series of simple phrases and sentences linked with simple connectors like <i>and</i> , <i>but</i> and <i>because</i> .
A1	I can write a short, simple postcard, for examples sending holiday greetings. I can fill in forms with personal details, for example entering my name, nationality and address on a hotel registration form.	I can write simple isolated phrases and sentences.

**Table 5:** Some descriptors of the CEFR writing scales for self-assessment of writing skills (Council of Europe 2001)

scriptors should be explicit about the skills and learning content to be acquired. Unfortunately, this is not the case for students who use the CEFR to assess their proficiency in Chinese writing skills.

As we have noted, mastering the use of Pinyin and characters is the sixth skill, which distinguishes Chinese from European languages. Writing both in Pinyin transcription and in characters requires specific learning activities and teaching approaches. This causes problems when the CEFR scales and descriptors are applied to Chinese, since the CEFR does not provide teachers and students with guidance on how to approach this sixth skill. According to the CEFR, to perform communicative tasks and activities in the context of the target language requires learners to have linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences. Linguistic competences include lexical, grammatical, semantic, phonological, orthographic and orthoepic competence. Learners of Chinese also need to acquire these six linguistic competences, but because the CEFR is a language-independent document, its level descriptors do not take account of most of the typological features Chinese.

According to the HSK guidelines (Hanban/Confucius Institute Headquarters 2009a and 2009b), the tests at levels 1 and 2 do not include writing skills (Table 6), whereas the corresponding levels of the CEFR do include writing skills (Table 5). In addition, the instructions are not clear on whether or not it is necessary to learn Chinese characters. As shown in the sample tests, all Chinese characters are provided with Pinyin transcriptions at levels 1 and 2 (Figure 1) (<http://new.chinesetesting.cn>). Test takers need neither to recognize characters when reading the test items nor to write any characters. Since answering the test items does not require them to use characters, do learners have to learn characters at all at Levels 1 and 2?

If we look at a sample test at level 3 (Figure 2) (<http://new.chinesetesting.cn>), we find that all test items are written in characters only, including the test

HSK levels	Listening items	Reading items	Writing items	Total items	Total time (minutes)
1	20	20	–	40	40
2	35	25	–	60	50
3	40	30	10	80	85
4	45	40	15	100	100
5	45	45	10	100	120
6	50	50	1	101	135

**Table 6:** Overview of the number of items for the three language skills tested in the new HSK (Hanban/Confucius Institute Headquarters 2010)

## Level 1

第二部分，共5题。提供5个问句和5个回答，考生要找出对应关系。

Nǐ hē shuǐ ma?  
例如：你 喝 水 吗？

正确答案：F

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Nǐ zěnmé qù nàge fàndiàn?  
11. 你 怎么 去 那个 饭店？

A. Zhōngguó rén .      diǎn le .      Píngguǒ .  
A. 中 国 人      B. 7 点 了 。      C. 苹 果 。

D. 20 kuài .      Zuò chūzūchē .      Hǎo de , xièxiè!  
D. 20 块 。      E. 坐 出 租 车 。      F. 好 的 ， 谢 谢 ！

11. A ☐ B ☐ C ☐ D ☐ E ☐ F ☐

## Level 2

第二部分，共5题。试卷上有几张图片，每题提供一到两个句子，句子中有一个空格，考生要从提供的选项中选择词填空。

Zhèr de yángrou hěn hǎochī , dànshì yě hěn ( ) 。  
例如：这 儿 的 羊 肉 很 好 吃 ， 但 是 也 很 ( ) 。

正确答案：E

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Qǐng jìn 。 Nǐ zhǎo wǒ yǒu shénme ( ) ?  
6. 请 进 。 你 找 我 有 什 么 ( ) ？

A. qùnián      B. bǐ      C. xīwàng  
A. 去 年      B. 比      C. 希 望

D. xiàng      E. guì      F. shìqíng  
D. 向      E. 贵      F. 事 情

6. A ☐ B ☐ C ☐ D ☐ E ☐ F ☐

Fig. 1: An online sample test of the new HSK at Level 1 and 2 (www.chinesetesting.cn)

instructions. This effectively means that the level one wants to achieve in the language has far-reaching consequences for the effort involved. The way the levels are tested now, the shift from level 2 to level 3 involves a shift from the (exclusive) use of Pinyin to the exclusive use of characters, requiring a major additional effort for learners compared to a shift from level A2 to B1 in any of the European languages. For students with a modest short-term goal, such as getting to know the Chinese language, Pinyin suffices to learn pronunciation and enables one to communicate with others. For students with long-term goals such as learning Chinese as a major or studying in China, it is difficult to achieve higher levels without learning characters. In other words, if students do not learn characters at lower levels, their progress to higher levels will be very challenging.

第二部分，共10题。每题提供一到两个句子，句子中有一个空格，考生要从提供的选项中选词填空。

例句：她说话的( )多好听啊！ ( )

正确答案：E

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11. 除了数学，弟弟的( )成绩都不错。 ( )

A. 刻 B. 双 C. 音乐 D. 其他 E. 声音 F. 干净

11. A ☐ B ☐ C ☐ D ☐ E ☐ F ☐

Fig. 2: An online sample test of the new HSK at Level 3 (<http://new.chinesetesting.cn>)

## 4 Towards a HSK/CEFR-based syllabus

### 4.1 Current instructional designs for learning Chinese writing systems at Dutch universities

To investigate whether it is appropriate to apply CEFR writing scales in HSK, we analyzed Chinese course descriptions at beginners' levels (levels 1 and 2) at eight university language centres in The Netherlands and Belgium. Chinese is offered either on a non-credit basis or as a credit-bearing option. Students typically take Chinese because they believe in its vocational value. We looked at three aspects of the courses in particular:

1. How do they plan the instruction of Chinese writing systems (Pinyin and characters)?
2. How many characters do students have to learn at levels 1 and 2?
3. Do the language centres provide a description of instructional design or of the teaching and learning activities used to develop writing skills?

At level 1 there are three possible situations: 1) Pinyin and characters are introduced at the same time after the first few classes and based on the characters in the textbook; 2) a limited number of characters are taught, such as those for the numbers 1–10 and the most frequently used characters; and 3) only Pinyin is taught. At level 2 most teachers continue with Pinyin as a means of communicating pronunciation but there is no longer any instruction or training in its use. With one exception, all universities teach Chinese characters at this level.

However, the number of characters that students have to learn varies from 20 to 200. Most universities do not clearly state that characters should be used for three types of written communication specified in CEFR/HSK level descriptors: overall written communication, correspondence, notes, messages and forms.

## 4.2 The teachers

To investigate teachers' perceptions of the new HSK and its application of the CEFR, we conducted telephone interviews with three teachers of Chinese at the universities of Utrecht, Nijmegen and Leuven using the following open questions:

1. Are you familiar with the new version of Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK) implemented since 2009?
2. Do you base your course programs on the new HSK syllabus?
3. How do you plan the instruction of Chinese writing systems (Pinyin and characters)?
4. Are the tables of new HSK test levels clear to you in terms of the number of characters and which characters your students are to learn at levels 1 and 2? Why/why not?
5. How do you decide on the number of characters and which characters your students have to learn at levels 1 and 2?
6. Do you think it is useful for your students to use CEFR writing scales for self-assessment? Why/why not?

During the telephone interviews we took extensive notes since it is difficult to record interviewees' responses. After each interview, we wrote a summary based on the notes we had taken. After all the responses had been summarized, we analyzed and integrated the data to arrive at an overall response to each question. Finally, we interpreted the data and clustered the answers to these questions, which yielded the following results.

Three of the interviewed teachers knew the new version of HSK, but generally they were not familiar with the differences between the new and old HSK. None of these teachers designed course programs based on the new HSK syllabus. However, they were aware of the link between the new HSK and the CEFR.

These teachers taught the sixth skill of writing using Pinyin and characters in different ways, but they all arranged the curriculum in such a way that both Pinyin and characters were introduced at level 1. Two teachers admitted that learning Chinese characters is not a course requirement since the Chinese courses are not part of the formal curriculum: their students could choose whether or not they wanted to learn characters, depending on their own progress and circum-

stances. For these two teachers, written skills refer mostly to Pinyin transcription. Only one teacher implemented characters as part of the formal course requirements.

As for the new HSK test levels, the teachers were unsure what “vocabulary” stood for; they assumed it referred either to words or to characters. They also pointed out the differences between words and characters: a Chinese word consists of one or more characters and characters can be used to compose new words (Gao 2000). The number of words can be the same as or different from the number of different characters.

### 4.3 The students

To investigate potential test takers’ level of understanding, we asked three students who planned to take the HSK test at level 1 and three who planned to take it at level 2 to complete a questionnaire. We asked them to view the sample test online (<http://new.chinesetesting.cn>) and then to answer the following questions:

1. Look at the new HSK test levels (see Table 6). How many characters do you think you need to learn to pass the exam?
2. Do you think that characters are required to pass this test? Why/why not?
3. Look at the CEFR writing descriptors for self-assessment (see Table 5). Do the level descriptors make clear how you should assess your writing skills in Chinese? Why/why not?

At level 1 the number of characters that students thought they would have to learn ranged from 0 to 10. This differs from the number of vocabulary items listed in Table 6 and implies that students consider that learning characters is different from learning vocabulary. Because they first viewed the sample tests, it is not surprising that they thought it would not be necessary to learn characters to pass the test. As for question 2, it is interesting that one student who indicated the number of characters to be learnt as zero thought characters were required to pass the test. This shows the confusion caused by conflicting interpretations after viewing the sample tests and the self-assessment descriptors (see Table 5). The level 1 students also stated that it might be better to learn characters as well as Pinyin, although they thought it would be difficult to learn both at the same time. As for using the A1 CEFR descriptors, they thought writing a postcard in Pinyin was sufficient to achieve this level. Their interpretation of the level 1 descriptors was that it would be sufficient to be able to write words rather than sentences.

At level 2 the number of characters that students thought they would have to learn ranged from 0 to 400. This again differs from the number of vocabulary

items listed in Table 6. Since the level 2 test does not require writing skills, one student thought that he would not have to learn any characters at all. On the other hand, two students thought that it might be better to learn characters as well because it might help them to establish the meaning of the words with certainty, and because tones are particularly important when writing in Pinyin. As for using the CEFR writing descriptors for self-assessment, one student pointed out the ambiguity of the descriptors: he was not sure whether writing in Pinyin or characters was required.

## 5 Suggestions and conclusion

To establish the international status of the new Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK), it was a good idea to link the HSK proficiency levels to the CEFR. What is more, using the CEFR has the major advantage that it allows teachers of Chinese to capture a general picture of learners' language proficiency. At the same time, applying the CEFR writing descriptors to Chinese might cause problems because these descriptors do not take into account the unique features of the Chinese language. It is unclear which writing system (Pinyin transcription or characters) the CEFR descriptors and scales refer to. The conflict between the CEFR level descriptors and the new HSK tests should be noted. It appears to be necessary to develop a different approach to the acquisition of writing competence in Chinese. On the one hand, we would like to suggest that the policy makers of Hanban and other educational systems specify clearly in their instructional design how the sixth skill of Pinyin and characters should be approached: (1) how well learners of Chinese should learn Pinyin transcription; (2) when they should start learning Chinese characters; and (3) how many characters learners should know receptively and productively at the end of each successive stage of learning (Hsiao 2009). On the other hand, to the best of our knowledge none of the current Chinese textbooks has been updated to take account of the words and characters listed in the Chinese Proficiency Test Syllabus – not even the most popular textbook series, *New Practical Chinese Reader*, published by Beijing Language and Culture University. We would therefore like to suggest that teachers of Chinese should require their students to learn for productive use the words listed in the Chinese Proficiency Test Syllabus; i.e., they should be able to spell the words in Pinyin transcription and reproduce the characters. While beginners often struggle in their efforts to learn new words and pronunciation at the same time, most Chinese language textbooks nevertheless include a long list of new words. Focusing on compulsory words not only connects what students learn to the new HSK,

but also prevents them becoming overloaded as a result of having to learn too many words at the beginning.

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